DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 958 CG 026 114

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TITLE The Mano a Mano Project: A Collaborative Mentoring Effort.

PUB DATE Oct 94

NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the "Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Collaborative Approach to Achieving Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools Conducive to Learning" Conference (Washington, DC, October 28-29, 1994).

PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Ancillary School Services; At Risk Persons; Children; Elementary Education; *Grade 3; *Grade 4; High Risk Students; *Hispanic Americans; *Mentors; *Modeling (Psychology); Pupil Personnel Services; *Role Models; Special Needs Students

IDENTIFIERS *Big Brother Big Sister Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a primary prevention program begun in the spring of 1993 through the efforts of School Social Workers of the Albuquerque Public Schools Special Education Department, that serves at-risk Hispanic special education elementary school students and their families. It is a collaborative project that recruits Hispanic students from a local university to become a Big Brother or Big Sister to an Hispanic 3rd or 4th grader for 3-5 hours each week for at least a 9-month period. A local Big Brothers/Big Sisters program provides the screening of the college students, helps with the matches, and monitors the matches. Hispanic special education students, those from single-parent homes, and those with inadequate social skills, low self-esteem, or other difficulties are the targeted population. Potential candidates are referred by school staff. The children are then screened by School Social Workers, which includes a home visit. The program emphasizes a team approach and it is shown how such an approach can benefit numerous other components of the larger community. Provided here are characteristics of the program site, the various types of support from the community, the type of staff available for the program, program costs and funding, problems encountered and the solutions to these problems, program accomplishments, and evaluation data. (RJM)

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The Mano a Mano Project: A Collaborative Mentoring Effort

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1. **The Mano a Mano Project: A Collaborative Mentoring Effort,** Albuquerque Public Schools, Northwest Region, 120 Woodland NW, Albuquerque, NM, 87107, ph(505)345-8531, fax(505)345-8543, contact: Cristina Durán Meléndez, MSW, School Social Worker.

2. **Program Overview.** The Mano a Mano Project is a mentoring program that began in the Spring of 1993 through the efforts of School Social Workers of the Albuquerque Public Schools Special Education Department. A committee of School Social Workers met on a regular basis for a full year to carefully plan before implementing the Project. The Mano a Mano Project is a primary prevention program serving at-risk Hispanic special education elementary school students and their families in the Los Duranes neighborhood of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Mano a Mano Project is a collaborative, involving the Albuquerque Public Schools, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Albuquerque, Inc., and professors, staff, and students from the University of New Mexico. Mano a Mano recruits Hispanic students from the University of New Mexico (UNM) to become a Big Brother or Big Sister to an Hispanic 3rd or 4th grader who is considered at-risk, and commit to spending 3-5 hours weekly with him/her for at least a 9-month period. UNM professors offer academic credit to participating students through independent study if they so choose. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Albuquerque provides the screening of the UNM students, helps to make the matches, and carefully monitors the matches over the 9-month period and beyond, if the matches continue. School Social Workers conduct groups for the parents of the elementary schoool students who get matched, and also facilitate monthly groups/trainings for the UNM students involved.

3. **Program Purpose.** To provide preventive services at the elementary school level by assisting 3rd and 4th grade Hispanic students who are considered at-risk (and their families) to become productive members of society and healthy learners by providing and sustaining meaningful one-to-one relationships with adults.

4. **Implementation Period.** The Mano a Mano Committee of School Social Workers met on a regular basis for the entire school year 92-93 before start-up in the Fall of 1993.

We are now in the middle of the second year of operation and are planning for the third year.

5. **Characteristics of Program Site.** The Albuquerque Public School District is the 25th largest school district in the nation, with an enrollment of approximately 90,000 students. The ethnic mix of APS is 47% Anglo, 43% Hispanic, 4.4% Native American, 3.4% African American, and 1.8% Asian American. Of all students who started high school in 1989, 23% dropped out before graduating. A particularly alarming fact that has serious implications is impacting at the elementary school level: that 26% of 4th graders have experimented with beer or wine, 6% with liquor, and *17% with inhalants* (9% have used inhalants during the last year).

The pilot school, Duranes Elementary School, is located in the near North Valley of Albuquerque, and has approximately 600 students. Of these students, over 90% are Hispanic (primarily native New Mexicans), and more than 85% qualify for free lunch. Los Duranes is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city and, although maintaining a strong identity because of families who have resided in the area for generations, has more than its share of gang and drug activity, and poverty. The second school we moved into this year, Kit Carson Elementary, shares similar characteristics to Duranes. Both schools are located in areas of Albuquerque where residents and schools often feel overlooked or neglected when it comes to the distribution of resources.

6. **Target Population and Number of Students Served.** Hispanic special education students in the 3rd or 4th grades are targeted. Other at-risk criteria include: from single parent homes, low-income, inadequate social skills, low self-esteem, withdrawn, absenteeism, special education exceptionalities such as learning disabled, communication disordered, but without severe behavioral problems. We have tended to target boys over girls due to the shortage of Big Brother volunteers in the regular Big Brother/Big Sister program. Girls, on the other hand, can be matched within 2-3 months through the regular program. Presently, because we are absorbing the work of this Project within the scope of

our regular duties as School Social Workers, we are making approximately 7 matches a year. We plan to increase this number and move into other schools and perhaps into the middle schools as funding and staff permit.

7. **Services Provided.** *A Primary Prevention Program.* The high degree of success experienced in the first year of implementation indicates the Mano a Mano Project's ability to excel on a number of important levels. First, it can be considered a primary prevention program. As School Social Workers we saw first hand the reality many of our youth face in Albuquerque: an increase in violent crime, increased teenage pregnancy, problems with substance abuse, gang activity, and that many of these problems prevented youth from maximizing their education. We also felt that the large numbers of Hispanics in New Mexico mandated that we address the needs of this group. The Mano a Mano Project is a way to provide preventive services at a young age, knowing the power that a mentorship relationship can hold, in hopes that problems later might be prevented.

Using a Team Approach. The Project employs a team approach using Pupil Services Personnel. Our committee of School Social Workers worked closely with school staff: the Principal, counselor, head teacher, classroom teachers, educational assistants, and nurse's assistant, especially in helping to identify students who would benefit from the Project. At every step, from the initial stages of planning, to recruitment of students, to the parent groups, to gathering pre- and post- data, to evaluation, to the awards ceremony, we involved school staff.

Once potential candidates for the Project are referred to us by school staff, School Social Workers would then start a pre-screening process by briefly interviewing the kids, then doing a home visit with parents. If both parents and kids are interested, we would then invite families to an orientation held jointly by School Social Workers and a representative from Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Big Brothers/Big Sisters would then proceed with more interviews and orientation leading up to the match. In some cases, siblings of the identified student have also been matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister.

Community Collaboration. This is the cornerstone of the Mano a Mano Project. All three entities involved had not only something to offer the Project, but something to gain as well. Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Inc., known for their quality programs nationwide, was interested in diversifying the services they provided, and had not been successful in recruiting minority volunteers as Big Brothers/Big Sisters. They welcomed an opportunity to develop a program in the schools, as did UNM. As most universities are always encouraged to increase their involvement with the community, UNM was interested in the Mano a Mano Project. But perhaps in addition to wanting the increased community involvement, the students, professors, and staff at UNM became involved in the Project also for cultural reasons, which is an important reason why our Project demonstrates a high level of cultural competency.

Cultural Competence. We had to carefully and thoughtfully look at the recruitment of Hispanic college students, given that minorities do not have a high rate of volunteering in formal institutions, and that Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Albuquerque had not been successful in recruiting minority volunteers. As a result, rather than employing a "shotgun" approach to recruiting students, we strategically approached departments and individuals who we knew were part of a Chicano/Hispanic network at UNM (such as the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, the College Enrichment Program, and Hispanic Student Services), and appealed to Hispanic students who were aware of the conditions of their community, especially among youth. (Through this network we also located professors from different disciplines who were willing to offer independent study to participating UNM students). We knew that an important aspect of Hispanic culture for those who have the opportuity to go on to higher education is a desire to maintain a link with their community of origin by "giving something back." Indeed, the UNM students who participated in Mano a Mano were drawn to the Project for this reason: they know they will be matched with a Hispanic young person, want to be a part of bettering their community, and are being approached in a way that is sensitive to their cultural identity. In

sum, we wanted the Mano a Mano Project to maximize the resources available to us in Albuquerque, and provide successful Hispanic adult role models to Hispanic children.

As far as the process of recruiting UNM students, we made presentations to student groups and also had counselors, professors, and other student services staff identify potential volunteers, and invited them to an orientation held jointly by the Coordinator and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. This orientation would be held on campus at two different times so as to accomodate the varied schedules of university students, and the Project would be discussed and applications distributed. We would follow-up with attendees of the orientation to assess their interest and encourage their participation. Once completed applications have been submitted, Big Brothers/Big Sisters begins their screening process of the volunteers, including a police check, human services check, reference checks, an interview, home visit, personality test, etc. The screening process is the same as it is for the regular pool of volunteer Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Parental Participation. By offering parent groups on a monthly basis at the school site, we not only wanted to provide a forum for parents to discuss how the matches were going, but to also assess their interests and needs relating to their role as single-parents. The school especially appreciated this component, since it had been struggling with ways to involve parents in the education of their children. The parent groups are co-facilitated by a School Social Worker and an MSW intern.

8. **Type of Staff Available, Percentage FTE Devoted to Program.** We do not have any full-time staff assigned to the Project. We have a committee of 4 School Social Workers and an MSW intern who divide up the work, and essentially absorb it into our daily work as special education School Social Workers. The Coordinator, who serves on the Committee, was given administrative approval to devote only about 1/4 of her time to the Project.

9. **Cost of Program and Funding Sources.** The Mano a Mano Project operates without extra funding, which makes it extremely cost-effective. This is the beauty of a

collaborative. We will need outside funding, however, in order for the Project to expand to more elementary schools and to serve more children in the district.

10. **Problems Encountered and Solutions.** One of our biggest problems is that we do not have any full-time staff assigned to the Project. Committee members, including the Coordinator, work on the Project in addition to carrying a caseload of special education students and their families. The history of how School Social Work services have been provided in the district has somewhat restricted our services to direct work with a caseload of students. However, this trend appears to be changing with the development of Projects such as Mano a Mano, and we continue to look for creative solutions for how to develop more programs such as this, while at the same time meeting administrative demands.

Another problem we face is that we are not able to serve a large number of students through the Mano a Mano Project. Realistically, we will never be able to meet the demand for Big Brothers and Big Sisters that exists in our schools. We are limited in the number of matches we can make partly due to the fact that Big Brothers/Big Sisters, without additional funding, is also limited in the number of matches it can make for us outside of their regular program. This problem can be solved by increasing human and financial resources, however, and we are in the process of identifying potential funders. One minor problem has been the fact that some of the volunteers from UNM often come to New Mexico to study from out-of- state. This reduces the chances that the matches will continue beyond the initial 9-month commitment, and means that students are without their Big Brothers or Sisters during university breaks when out-of-state students return home. To remedy this, we have made a special effort to recruit UNM students who are local to the area, if possible. In addition, we plan to also recruit from the community college in the area, whose student population will be more local with a higher probability of staying in the area, thereby potentially increasing the longevity of the matches. (We are finding that UNM students from Albuquerque or within the state are tending to continue with their matches after their initial 9-month commitment is up).

11., 12. **Program Accomplishments/Reported Ourcomes; Evaluation Data.** The Mano a Mano Committee decided early on to include an evaluation component which is comprised of pre- and post-data on variables that might tell us something about how this Project is making a difference for the students served. Our MSW intern oversaw this component, collected the data, and compiled a final report. Preliminary results indicate a significant improvement among the students involved, especially in the area of school attendance and behavior. Overall, the Mano a Mano Project has been so successful that Big Brothers/Big Sisters agreed to double the number of matches made for the third year. We will continue to evaluate the program during its second year, and are investigating possibilities of developing a more comprehensive system of evaluation through the College of Education at UNM.

13. **Publications Describing/Evaluating Program.** None at the present time.

14. **Additional Relevent Information.** None.